The Ever-Turning Wheel: Wrestling with the Costs of Compassion

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“A human being is part of the whole, called by us “Universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. **Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.** Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such an achievement is in itself a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security.

—Albert Einstein, as quoted in the New York Times, March 29, 1972”
In a similar vein, the Gemara relates that Rabbi Ḫiyya said to his wife: When a poor person comes to the house, be quick to give him bread so that they will be quick to give bread to your children. She said to him: Are you cursing them, your children? He said to her: It is a verse that is written, as it says: “Due to this thing,” and the school of Rabbi Yishmael taught that it is a wheel that continuously turns in the world. Similarly, it was taught in a baraita that Rabbi Gamliel, son of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, says: The verse that states: “And He will show you mercy and have compassion on you and multiply you” (Deuteronomy 13:18) teaches us that anyone who has compassion for God’s creatures will receive compassion from Heaven, and anyone who does not have compassion for God’s creatures will not receive compassion from Heaven.

Shabbat 151b:14
Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue is a term that describes the physical, emotional, and psychological impact of helping others — often through experiences of stress or trauma. Compassion fatigue is often mistaken for burnout, which is a cumulative sense of fatigue or dissatisfaction.

–https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/signs-compassion-fatigue
What Causes Compassion Fatigue?

01 Desensitization
02 Secondary Trauma
03 Lack of Self Care/Time to Process
What is Secondary trauma?

Supporting people through their traumatic situations can be a trauma of its own, called secondary trauma. It’s especially common among helping professionals.

The chronic stress of taking in others’ trauma can lead to symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) such as emotional exhaustion or hypervigilance.

https://psychcentral.com/health/secondary-trauma
“The inner worlds of victims who have ‘recovered’ now reflect an acknowledgement of misfortune, an awareness of vulnerability. These survivors know their prior assumptions were naive, that tragedy can strike and no one is invulnerable. Their new assumptive worlds, however, are typically not completely negative...They know they are not entirely safe...yet they don’t see the entire world as dangerous.

—Ronnie Janoff-Bulman
Thank you!!